



Give Backyard Composting a Try!

Many Frederick County residents bag their cut grass and raked leaves, then place them out for curbside disposal or bring them to one of the yard trimming collection areas located around the County. However, there is an alternative that is more efficient, saves fuel and creates a valuable product for the landscape. What is this marvelous process? **Composting!**

Now is the perfect time to try your hand at backyard composting. Many people imagine that this is a smelly, time consuming and difficult task to master, but this does not have to be the case. Home composting is very easy to learn and can be a fun family project that only requires a small commitment of time. It also rewards one with wonderful byproduct— finished compost, often called “black gold” by gardeners. Although compost can be purchased at the garden center, it can be made at home for free! In addition to these benefits, by composting you are helping to keep resources—biodegradable organics—out of our County landfill.

What is composting? Composting is a natural recycling process that turns organic materials (leaves, kitchen scraps, grass, etc.) into a humus-rich soil amendment. Compost happens, on its own, all around us in the natural world. Beneficial microbes and other organisms are constantly at work decomposing organic matter, transforming “waste” into useable resources. By assisting this natural process we can speed up the time it takes and develop a system that can work efficiently in our own back yards.

Why would we want to do this? Because compost is the ultimate soil improver! Research shows that adding compost creates better soil structure, raises soil fertility and increases water holding capacity. This means that compost-rich gardens are more drought tolerant and grow healthier, tougher plants with stronger root systems. It’s also a sustainable, environmentally-friendly way to manage yard waste.

You probably already have everything they need to get started composting: organic materials, water and a little space. With a little know-how you’ll be on your way! A compost bin is not necessarily needed; compost can be made in a simple pile. However, some people do prefer using a bin because they feel it makes the whole process look neater. A bin can also help your pile to retain heat and moisture, which may speed up the decomposition process. The Frederick County Recycling Office has easy-to-use bins available for \$20. The Recycling Office also has plans available for building your own bin from commonly available materials such as old trashcans or wooden pallets. A shovel or pitchfork is helpful to turn the pile, but some “low-maintenance” composters even skip that step!

The process for composting can be as simple or as complex as you want it to be.

A few of the basics are:

1. Collect as many carbon-rich, dry “brown” materials (dried leaves, straw, twigs, shredded newspapers, paper, etc.) and as many high nitrogen “green” materials (grass clippings, fruit and vegetable scraps, coffee grounds, etc.) as you have.
2. Place approximately equal parts of browns and greens in your pile or bin. Don’t put meats, fats or oily products in your compost and make sure to bury food scraps to deter critters (dogs, raccoons, and other compost raiders).
3. A larger pile tends to hold in moisture, heat better and decompose faster, but you can add materials as you go. A pile shouldn’t be bigger than 4 feet tall or wide, as it will be difficult to manage the heat and moisture levels in such a large pile.
4. Add water to create uniform dampness throughout; the material should have the consistency of a wrung out sponge, damp but not sopping wet.
5. Turning your pile occasionally will allow it to continue to decompose much faster.

And that's all there is to getting started!

The material will be finished composting in two to twelve months depending on the type of materials composted and how often the pile is turned. You'll know it is finished composting when the pile no longer heats up and it has a dark, crumbly texture with a sweet, earthy aroma. Finished compost looks like expensive potting soil! Mix this material in your flowers or vegetables garden or use it to lightly top-dress your lawn. You will soon see the benefits of your labor in a beautiful, healthy landscape.

That's the "crash course" in backyard composting! For more details, printed flyers and additional information, or to request an instructional program on composting for your group or club, or to ask questions about your home compost pile, please contact the Department of Solid Waste Management's Office of Recycling by email at recycle@fredco-md.net, or call 301-600-2960. You can also stop by our offices at 9031 Reichs Ford Road in Frederick to purchase a compost bin, Monday through Friday, 7:30 am-4:30 pm.

Easy Compost Troubleshooting Guide

Problem	Cause	Cure
Foul Odor	Too wet	Mix pile or add coarse, dry material (straw, chips, dry leaves) and mix
	Not enough air	Turn pile
	Too much nitrogen	Add more brown (high carbon) materials and mix.
Pile not heating	Pile too small	Build larger pile
	Pile too dry	Mix pile and add moisture
	Poor aeration	Mix pile
	Not enough nitrogen	Add more green (high nitrogen) material and mix
	Materials too coarse	Chop or shred materials
Pile is damp and sweet smelling but will not heat up	Not enough nitrogen	Add more green material
The pile is damp and warm in the middle, but nowhere else	Pile is too small	Collect more material and mix with old material to make new pile
The pile is damp and sweet smelling but still will not heat up	Lack of nitrogen	Mix in nitrogen material and turn pile
The center of the pile dry	Not enough water	Moisten material while turning the pile
Pile too hot (over 140 degrees)	Pile too large	Make a smaller pile
	Not enough ventilation	Mix pile
Pile attracting animal or insect pests	Wrong materials used in pile	Remove all meat and dairy products
	Kitchen waste on surface of pile	Bury kitchen waste in pile. May want to cover tops of pile with one inch layer of garden soil or finished compost.